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Heading for Paralysis

Secret Millions for Contras Endanger Entire Foreign Policy

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By DAVE McCURDY

The House and Senate intelligence committees were told in December, 1981, about President Reagan's secret decision to channel money and arms through the CIA to the anti-government guerrillas in Nicaragua who became known as the *contras*. Almost from the beginning, Congress responded to shifting Administration rationales and conflicting information by trying to limit both the tactics and the goals of that aid.

In May, 1983, as a new member of the House committee, I voted with the majority to cut off covert actions within Nicaragua. Had the President been willing to impose reasonable restrictions on such operations—in order to prevent indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets, for example—it would have been possible to develop a workable policy to protect U.S. interests in Central America. But just one week after he told a joint session that "Congress shares both the power and the responsibility for our foreign policy," Reagan publicly refused to accept any conditions on the secret war.

This confusion of words and deeds has become a hallmark of the Reagan Administration. As a supporter of the President on much of his defense posture, and as one who believes that he is our chief national spokesman on foreign affairs, I have been willing to give the President the benefit of the doubt during my three terms in the House. Last year, after the President's request for military aid to the contras was defeated, I put together the bipartisan group that passed $27 million in non-military aid, based on my concern about the communist threat to our democratic allies and on Reagan's personal assurance that he sought a political, rather than a military, solution to the conflict in Central America.

I no longer believe that this Administration deserves the benefit of the doubt. When the President asked Congress again this year for aid to the contras, he said, "I want to state unequivocally that I will not augment this $100 million through the use of CIA or any other funds that have not been approved by Congress for this purpose." The law, too, was clear on this point.

Yet we now know from Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese III that up to $30 million received from secret arms sales to Iran was diverted to the contras by a staff member of the National Security Council, Lt. Col. Oliver North.

It remains to be seen who else was involved in this deliberate flouting of the law. But it is sadly clear that, little more than a decade after Watergate, we are again faced with a serious threat to the constitutional system of checks and balances that preserves our Union.

On the one hand, the President acted brazenly in taking the conduct of foreign policy out of the hands of the secretaries of state and defense and turning it over to the NSC staff while ordering the CIA not to inform even leaders of Congress and the intelligence committees about covert activities, as required by law.

After taking this bold action, however, he seems to have lost control of what his own aides were doing. Instead of having one elected leader in charge of the executive branch, we appear to have a group of unelected mini-presidents acting out of the White House basement on their own perceived authority.

In the Federalist Papers, Alexander Hamilton wrote that in the absence of a single executive "it often becomes impossible, amidst mutual accusations, to determine on whom the blame or the punishment of a pernicious measure, or a series of pernicious measures, ought really to fall. It is shifted from one to another with so much dexterity, and under such plausible appearances, that the public opinion is left in suspence about the real author. The circumstances which may have led to any national miscarriage or misfortune are sometimes so complicated that, where there are a number of actors who may have had different degrees and kinds of agency, though we may clearly see upon the whole that there has been mismanagement, yet it may be impracticable to pronounce to whose account the evil which may have been incurred is truly chargeable."

That is precisely the present danger. Congress does not operate in a vacuum. If enough members see a deliberate pattern of abuse of the intelligence oversight system, we may soon find ourselves unable to conduct any foreign policy at all. The President's Central America policy already was facing a serious challenge in the wake of this month's elections. The contras now are on their own insofar as further U.S. aid is concerned. With Col. North's departure, they have lost their best friend on the White House staff, and the President's own most earnest words are unlikely to sway any more votes on their behalf. Military aid passed the House last June, 221 to 209, with only 51 Democrats voting in favor. With a Democratic Senate in place, further aid is doubtful at best, unless the contras themselves are able to show some remarkable and unexpected success.

Trouble can be expected, too, for Administration initiatives in Angola and the Middle East.

Thus a dangerous trend may soon be apparent. Intelligence committees have a grave responsibility to their parent bodies. If they lose credibility because of executive branch deception, the inevitable result will be pressure for full-scale reviews of every policy action. It will be ironic and unfortunate if, by refusing to help make the system work, this President or a future President finds that he is unable to act at all.

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